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Feds poised to call for complete overhaul of worker, community protections from refinery spills, fires and explosions in California

RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA (January 15, 2014) – Community groups strongly support the U.S. Chemical Safety Board (CSB) draft report finding that safety oversight of oil refineries is fundamentally broken, and urge the CSB Board to adopt the report’s call for a complete overhaul of California’s refinery safety requirements.

The CSB’s draft “Regulatory Report” on Chevron’s August 6, 2012 Richmond refinery fire that nearly killed 19 workers and sent 15,000 residents to local hospitals for medical attention recommends that California establish a more rigorous safety framework by phasing in the “Safety Case,” a framework it says has made refineries elsewhere safer than U.S. refineries. CSB investigators concluded that stronger oversight, worker involvement, and public participation are needed to improve oil refinery safety.

“The CSB has shined the light on how bad Big Oil is operating in Richmond, Contra Costa County, throughout the state of California, and the United States,” said Stephanie Hervey, Communities for a Better Environment Richmond member. “The recommendation of the Safety Case regime is a regulatory standard we can all support and we need the safety case now to protect community and workers health and safety.”

Chevron repeatedly failed over a 10-year period to apply inherently safer design principles and upgrade piping in its crude oil processing unit, which was extremely corroded and ultimately ruptured in the August 2012 incident, the CSB reported in April 2013. Refining higher-sulfur crude accelerated the corrosion that led to the incident, the CSB found.

For many months before that disastrous fire, CBE and refinery workers had warned public officials that Chevron’s switch to higher-sulfur crude was worsening corrosion hazards.

Now, the community groups say, the industry’s failure to replace aging and unsafe equipment in combination with its push toward profit-boosting, inherently more hazardous, substitutes for conventional crude such as tar sands, should be seen as a ticking time bomb. Oil companies’ statewide drive toward denser, more contaminated, and more corrosive grades of oil make the need for preventive action urgent, the groups say. Current Bay Area proposals include a new

oil transfer terminal proposed by WesPac in Pittsburg, a pipeline from Richmond to Martinez proposed by Praxair, and expansions of oil processing, wharf loading or rail loading facilities by the Chevron Richmond, Phillips 66 Rodeo, and Valero Benicia refineries.

“In Pittsburg, we are very upset that the city would even consider such a dangerous project, like WesPAC’s so close to our homes, schools and parks without notifying us,” said George Monterrey, Pittsburg Ethics Council. “If we had the Safety Case now, WesPAC’s dirty crude by rail project could not go forward.”

"Valero refinery's Crude-By-Rail Project proposed for Benicia would dramatically increase the risks of catastrophe in our community," said Marilyn Bardet, founding member of Benicia Good Neighbor Steering Committee. "We support the CSB's researched and reasonable recommendations for the Safety Case regime for all refinery projects in the Bay Area and California. We demand protection now for public health and safety."

“In Rodeo and Crockett we need the Safety Case regime to protect us from a very flawed environmental impact report at the Phillips 66 refinery in Rodeo,” said Nancy Rieser, Crockett Rodeo Working Group. “We hope the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors does not approve this or any other project until the Safety Case is fully implemented.”

In addition to increasing the frequency and magnitude of chemical spills, fires, and explosions switching to denser, more contaminated grades of oil such as tar sands oil greatly increases already-serious refinery air pollutant emissions and climate impacts.

The CSB’s decision on this proposed report will have a ripple effect throughout the oil industry as local residents and workers grapple with the potential threats and safety hazards of tar sands oil being shipped, refined and moved by rail in the Bay Area and other parts of California.

The US Chemical Safety Board (CSB) is the nation’s pre-eminent chemical disaster investigative agency. Its members are all Presidential appointees and confirmed by the US Senate. The CSB has chosen Richmond, CA to release its final report on the causes of the August 6, 2012 Chevron Richmond Refinery Toxic Explosion and Fire.

For more information, go to www.cbecal.org.